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The Gazette

MAGAZINE

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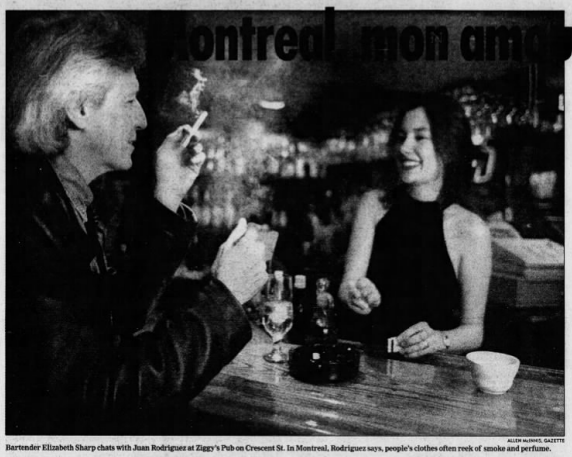
'Tempestuous, flirtatious, preening and orgasmic'



ALLEN McINNIS, GAZETTE

Bartender Elizabeth Sharp chats with Juan Rodriguez at Ziggy's Pub on Crescent St. in Montreal. Rodriguez says, people's clothes often reek of smoke and perfume.

Juan Rodriguez examines his home town's psyche after living for several years in bucolic, but politically correct, California.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

Although the first big snowstorms didn't occur until after Christmas, this has been the longest winter I have ever experienced. Perhaps it's because I had forgotten the others.

Maybe it's the incessant political talk at the bar, hitting me like a cold slap. Maybe it is because I'm older and feel vulnerable to injury caused by a slip. I murmur how utterly pathetic it is to see folks taking baby steps on a carpet of snow covering a sheet of ice. I wonder when I will fall and come crashing down – it happens at least once per winter – and I find myself thinking at all times of where and how to plant my feet. I have slipped, all right, and in those split seconds frozen in eternity when I struggle mightily to maintain my balance, the torque on my lower back is almost unbearable. But I don't fall.

The constant struggle makes me ruminate about Montreal's psyche – not only the city's seemingly perennial winter of discontent but qualities as endearing as they are infuriating.

Having lived almost my entire life in the shadow of the incessant quarrel between French and English, I had been enjoying the bucolic life in Berkeley Calif., since 1969. It's tough to choose what I missed less – politics or winter.

Berkeley life was simple. Anywhere I strolled, there was the sun-dimpled Bay; hills thatched green, brown and yellow; and, in between, nothing but big blue sky. The landscape fosters a laid-back lifestyle until randomness rears its ugly head – earthquakes, fires, floods, mudslides and drought.

Life's inherent risk is tamped down by political correctness. When I walked along yuppified College Ave. smoking a cigarette, people 10 yards away would break out in fits of coughing. A look at a pretty woman was greeted with a quick turn of the head or an accusatory stare, as if I was a rapist.

The town that spawned the Free Speech Movement in 1964 now spoke in convoluted code about sex and race (talk about your two solitudes).

Returning to Montreal brought me face to face with a supremely politically incorrect city – tempestuous, flirtatious, preening, orgasmic, hyperbolic, anarchic, incestuous – the only real Latin city north of the Rio Grande. We blow smoke, literally and figuratively.

We're people-watchers, shamelessly sniffing each other out. How refreshing it was to admire a woman and be greeted with a smile. It's a fashion town, regardless of one's social status. Clothes reek of perfume and cigarette smoke.

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Do your duty, Jean Charest, and lose

The last time I worked for a newspaper, in 1947, it was for the long-defunct Montreal Herald. Once a month I would paste my published reports on long sheets of paper and deliver them to a teller, who would pay me two cents a column line. In those days I was also earning three cents a line, spotting pins in a neighbourhood bowling alley. All the same, I opted for a career as a scribbler rather than a pinboy, proving my commitment to letters early on. My dedication has now been rewarded. I do hope this weekly column will be a happy experience for readers, and me, as I can't wait another 50 years for my next respectable job.

MORDECAI RICHLER

LONDON – When Europe's offshore islanders trek to the polls on May 1, they will at least benefit from the illusion of choice. They can endorse the traditional Tories – exhausted and undermined by sleaze – or copycat Labour, that is to say, the untried born-again Tories, led by Tony Blair, his smarmy smile suppressed until he is assured of victory. "Trust me," Blair has said, foolishly raising the doubts about his character that are on just about everybody's mind here.

The U.K. will not be making an ideological choice, but a management decision. Assuming Blair's takeover bid is successful, and he does ride into No. 10, then once Cherie has turned over the mattresses, he can be counted on to sell off whatever little is left in the nation's cupboard. Although opposed to privatization while in opposition, he will put air-traffic control up for sale, as well as the London tube system, Westminster bridge, and even the queen's knickers, if available.

But if Canadians are obliged to vote this summer, we will be denied even the illusion of choice. For the foreseeable future, ours is a one-party state. Our Tories are out of it. Ditto the NDP. Its leader, Alexa McDonough, yet to be seen in the same room as a voter, possibly to her party's advantage. Contrary Albertans would not vote for the Bloc Québécois, even if candidates were available, and Quebecers quite properly take Preston Manning's motley band for a giggle, the latter bunch hopelessly diminished since the departure of Stephen Harper, their one MP of substance. All that would be up for grabs this summer is which gaggle of regional malcontents could form Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, the fading Reformers or the Bloc sans Bouchard. The Bloc's new leader, Gilles Duceppe, is unlikely to attract soft-core nationalists in Quebec. He is not loved. He displays all the natural charm of a sealot born to inchoate rage. Happily this malady is not infectious, like rabies, although there are certain similarities.

We're in trouble. The morning after the poll, it's bound to be stumbling, inarticulate Jean Chrétien and his non-descript front bench back by default, given a second chance to lie about the GST and shrink-wrap the CBC. Once more the boys on the sales bus, Team Ra Ra Ra, will embarrass us by their junior chamber of commerce junkets to far parts, bragging about iffy "contracts of intent" they have brought home. Mind you, it was on the last such trip that Bouchard, in his unending quest for intellectual companionship, discovered a soulmate in Mike Harris. In my mind's eye, I see the two of them exchanging illuminations at dinner, Bouchard quoting Voltaire and Harris, Jay Leno.

Given that Quebec is the gridlock that continues to hold back meaningful Canadian traffic, the greatest service Chrétien could render unto our country would be to retire gracefully shortly after the election, yielding to hot-to-trot Paul Martin. The separatists feared Trudeau, but not Chrétien, who is a comfort to them, and I suspect that right now they are rooting for him to retain his seat in Saint-Maurice. Justifiably or not, Chrétien is anathema to francophone Quebecers, even the closet federalists among them – which brings me, finally, to the point of this sermon.

On a recent frenetic five-day trip home, I caught up with the admirable Jean Charest's just published Tory platform. He's for lower taxes, more provincial conferences, distinct-society status for Quebec, and better health care, among other things, but frankly, who gives a damn? Charest knows as well as the rest of us that he has as much chance of becoming our next prime minister as you or I do. His only plausible platform is to say he leads the one opposition party with deep national roots, and to plead for sufficient votes to boost the Tories back to official party status, if only to restore something approaching health to our body politic.

But I, for one, hope Charest loses his seat in Sherbrooke. That engaging man, the most popular francophone federalist in Quebec, was our most effective advocate during the last referendum. Now he must do his duty. We need him to displace Daniel Johnson, if he can be found, as provincial Liberal leader. Or, still better, to lead a federalist coalition into our next Quebec election. Charest may have it in him to be the young man to save our country from fracturing, after which time a grateful Canada just might elect him prime minister.

Come back, Jean, before it's too late. You've got some heavy lifting to do.

JOE SCHWARCZ D3 ◆ MIKE BOONE D6 ◆ DR. LAURA D6 ◆ PUZZLES D9 ◆ XPRESS D10

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